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Department of Agriculture

THE FIRES WE LEAVE BEHIND US

A radio talk by Roy Headley, Chief of the Division of Fire Control, Forest Service, broadcast Friday, July 2, 1937, in the Department of Agriculture period, National Farm and Home Hour.

In 1936 we left over 200,000 fires behind us as we passed through the forests of our country. These fires burned more than 41,000,000 acres, an area 8,000 square miles larger than the state of Illinois.

Europeans, to whom such losses seem incredible, wonder whether Americans are pyromaniacs or just plain dumb. When our priceless heritage of forests has already been reduced to a fraction of its one time wealth and splendor, why do we do such things?

I wish I knew.

The Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture is searching constantly for the answer, but without finding it so far. We know, of course, that some fires are true accidents as when motor vehicles burn up and set fire to the adjacent woods. Others are set for spite - spite against a neighbor or against the Government. Many fires are set by stock raisers who think this is a good way to improve the forage for their herds. And we know that carelessness accounts for most fires. There are careless campers, careless brush burners, careless railroads, careless lumbermen, careless hunters and fishermen, and above all others, careless smokers.

But we have not discovered much when we say that fires are caused by carelessness. Why are we careless? We do not mean to be that way. We have been told in countless ways how to be careful and we believe we should be. We know that scrupulous care in the use of fire in the woods is the only way to avoid fire danger. We know that safety habits are just as necessary in the dry woods as in a powder factory - but some of us at least, do not form those habits. As a result, we leave thousands of fires behind us and these in turn are followed by ruination of watersheds, floods, destruction of priceless scenic and recreational values and wholly or partially idle land, which except for these fires would be producing the raw material which would provide work for thousands of men in pulp and lumber mills and wood working factories. Too often the fires we leave behind us snuff out human lives in addition to the other destruction they cause. Why, when we know better, do we as a people so regularly take such chances? We have pretty well learned not to point supposedly unloaded guns at our friends. How can we learn comparable safety habits with fire in the woods?

That is the puzzle on which forest fire control officials spend much of their time. If you like puzzles, try your hand at that one and send your answers to the Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. You might think of something the experts have overlooked.

Or, if you would like a more tangible example to practice on, here is one: A small sawmill operator neglected fire safety measures around his

mill - a common occurrence. After being warned he did close down his mill but later returned to saw out a special bill of lumber. A 40 mile an hour wind occurred and as a result a fire started in the mill and spread to the nearby woods. No human power could stop that fire while the high wind lasted, and when the wind died down a magnificent body of young timber had been killed in the most destructive fire of the year on the National Forests. That particular sawmill man probably will not take such chances again; but hundreds of other mill men do take much the same chances every fire season. How would you get them to adopt the necessary safety measures? If you say "Compel them by law to do so," then you have another puzzle. How would you so arouse public sentiment that laws with teeth in them would be enacted, and judges and juries so impressed with the social consequences of such carelessness that they will convict offenders?

Smokers are one of the biggest puzzles in fire prevention. Last summer a suburb of Los Angeles was barely saved from a fire started by recreationists smoking at a resort some miles away.

While fighting one fire in the Lake States last summer, a crew of men saw another fire start from a cigarette thrown from a passing automobile. The second fire spread so fast that it swallowed up the first fire and burned a tractor which was working on the fireline. The firefighters were unable to get the number of the passing car. The puzzle is how can anyone be so insensitive to the sight of weary, smokebegrimed firefighters as carelessly to start a second fire nearby?

In 1933, some unknown person dropped an unextinguished match or cigarette in a park in California. The result was that a watershed was destroyed and 28 firefighters were burned to death by the treacherous conflagration started by one careless person who may never even have known that his carelessness caused the disaster. Again the puzzle is why should anyone indulge in carelessness which can so easily lead to such catastrophes?

These smoker fires represent the toughest puzzle occupying the minds of foresters and fire control planners, for 24 percent of all man-caused fires on the National Forests are attributed to smokers. Including unavoidable duplications the count of people visiting the National Forests totals 70,000,000 persons who use or pass through these wooded areas each year. To watch them all would be intolerable to the visitors even if practicable. There is no way to pick out the particular individuals who are going to be careless. It would be a pity to exclude them from their National Forests during the fire season. There are numerous laws against starting fires and vigorous efforts are made to enforce these laws. But the fires continue.

While the Forest Service has developed a fire-fighting force which can take care of fires after they start, even though putting out such fires may be costly, we still wonder what can be done to prevent the fires from starting.

If you do not know the practical arts and skills which constitute fire safety, write or ask the nearest State or Federal Ranger or Forester.

And here is a last puzzle to work on. We have almost arrived at the time for another Fourth of July celebration, with all that means in the way of fireworks and fire danger as well as historical commemoration, sports and recreation. It would be such a pity for children of all ages to be denied the pleasure of fireworks. But how would you insure that they be used with safety - safety to dry forests, as well as to eyes, fingers and human life?

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